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The historic Buckingham Fountain, centerpiece to 29 miles of shoreline and lakefront parks, provides pavilions for outdoor events for up to 4,800 attendees.

Photo courtesy of Chicago Convention & Tourism Bureau

Chicago

The City For Winning Meetings And Events

By George Seli

Even though the NFC Championship Chicago Bears didn't bring home the Vince Lombardi trophy this year, the city of Chicago is still the hands-down winner for meetings and events. Chicago, which celebrated its 170th birthday this month, is among the largest of the leading convention cities with the majority of its hotel community located in a relatively compact downtown area. Thanks to McCormick Place, major upscale hotel brands, O'Hare and Midway airports, and a centralized location, the Windy City's reputation as a host for business meetings of all kinds is unquestioned. The city offers more than 20,000 rooms within three miles of McCormick Place, and the Navy Pier has even more hotel rooms in close proximity — with 17,000 rooms within one mile, and 26,000 rooms within two miles.

In fact, Chicago's prowess in that market sometimes overshadows its incentive appeal, which is clearly distinct from cities like Orlando and Scottsdale, but also from New York. Vintage Chicago attractions include the Magnificent Mile, Navy Pier, Wrigley Field, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Shedd Aquarium, but even the simple pleasures of deep-dish pizza may be enough to inspire some potential qualifiers.

Hanson Ansary, president of PRA Chicago, a major DMC in the city, noted that about 60 percent of his corporate group business falls into the incentive category. "Typically in the United States we don't think of Chicago as an incentive destination, but it has so much more to offer than people recognize," he said, citing the city's cleanliness, Midwestern hospitality and vast collection of museums, restaurants and special-event venues comparable to New York's.

Aggressive Pricing

"That's what I love about Chicago, you can find everything you need," said Eric Cross, chief solutions officer for Eventive Marketing Solutions, a Kennesaw, GA-based performance-improvement company. "We use the downtown area as our primary selling point — Michigan Avenue and all the activities that are in such close proximity. Our clients on the

"The numerous developments on the hotel front point to the fact that everybody is banking on Chicago being a hot destination..."



**Hanson Ansary, President
PRA Chicago, Chicago, IL**

East and West Coasts look for a central location with good airlift, and because of the two airports and all of the airline options, Chicago is one of the most competitive cities for airfare. And as long as McCormick Place isn't operating a citywide buyout for an event, the hotel pricing is very aggressive."

Chicago's skyline, crowned by the country's tallest building, the Sears Tower, is itself a selling point for your attendees. Barbara Arnold, meeting planner with West Hollywood, CA-based Ticketmaster, staged an annual leadership meeting for 225 attendees at the Swissôtel Chicago. "The first night I did my onsite reception on the

top floor of the hotel in the (3,144-square-foot) Edelweiss Penthouse, which had a wonderful view of the city," she commented. She followed it up the second night with a dinner cruise aboard Mystic Blue, a 600-passenger vessel departing from Navy Pier, once again using the

skyline as a backdrop. And for a more indigenous Chicago experience, attendees were treated to seeing the Chicago White Sox, 2005 World Series champions, in action, with transportation arranged by PRA.

One of the motivations for selecting Chicago was its accessibility, Arnold noted. Most attendees flew into O'Hare International Airport, while many on the East Coast arrived at Midway International Airport. The group's 50 to 75 international attendees also found Chicago's airlift convenient, she added. O'Hare is poised to become even more efficient with its ongoing Modernization Program, which will add two new runways by 2010 (the first opening in 2008), and FACE (Façade and Circulation Enhancement) Project on Terminals 1, 2 and 3. Wi-Fi service is currently available in public areas at both O'Hare and Midway, and for a small fee, attendees can check into their flight at O'Hare and receive their boarding pass directly from McCormick Place via a remote Skycap program called Baggage Airline Guest Services (BAGS).

McCormick Place Expansion

Although McCormick Place is anything but short on meeting and exhibit space, with 2.2 million square feet of exhibit halls, 112 meeting rooms and assembly space for 10,000, it will offer significantly more space with the opening of the West Building, slated to debut this fall. In total, McCormick Place West will offer 470,000 square feet of exhibit space and 250,000 square feet of meeting space (more than 60 meeting rooms), as well as a 100,000-square-foot ballroom and a rooftop garden for up to 800 attendees.

While McCormick Place is certainly the centerpiece of Chicago's meeting industry, the Renaissance Schaumburg Hotel & Convention Center will complement it in July. The center features a 100,000-square-foot exhibit hall, and the 500-room connected hotel will offer 48,634 square feet of meeting space. Another formidable special-event venue is Navy Pier, with 170,000 square feet of exhibit space and 48,000 square feet of meeting space including an 18,150-square-foot ballroom with panoramic views of Lake Michigan. During free time, attendees can enjoy the Crystal Gardens, a 15-story Ferris wheel, Chicago Shakespeare Theater and other classic Pier diversions. Last fall, The Village of Hoffmann Estates, a northwest suburb of Chicago, debuted the Sears Centre Arena, a 12,000-seat multipurpose facility.

Complementing these developments is the city's burgeoning hotel inventory, projected to add 3,000 new rooms to its current 30,000-plus by 2009.



Chicago's Navy Pier is packed with a myriad of entertainment options as well as 48,000 square feet of meeting space and 170,000 square feet of exhibit space. An 18,150-square-foot ballroom offers sweeping views of Lake Michigan.

Photo courtesy of Fairmont Hotels & Resorts

Said Ansary, "The numerous developments on the hotel front point to the fact that everybody, including the investors, is banking on Chicago being a hot destination in the foreseeable future." One of the most anticipated projects is the \$750 million Trump International Hotel and Tower. With completion estimated for 2008, the second-tallest building in Chicago will include 286 five-star condo-hotel units and 20,000 square feet of meeting space. The property is currently

under construction on the site of the former Chicago Sun-Times building on the Chicago River. Following is a sampling of other significant projects:

- * Mandarin Oriental Chicago, a 250-room property scheduled to be completed in 2009 near Millennium Park, will feature a 10,000-square-foot ballroom and four additional private meeting rooms.
- * The first U.S.-based Shangri-La property, the 200-room Shangri-La Hotel, Chicago, comprising floors 12 to 27 of the new Waterview Tower, is set to open in early 2009. It will offer a grand ballroom accommodating 250 for receptions and 180 for dinners.
- * The 412-room Westin Chicago North Shore, located 16 miles north of O'Hare, opened last fall with 20 meeting rooms and 35,000 square feet of meeting space.
- * The 398-room Crowne Plaza Hotel Chicago-Metro opened in July last year in the West Loop near the Sears Tower. Four meeting rooms totaling approximately 8,000 square feet are available.
- * The 297-room James Chicago, offering 7,000 square feet of meeting space, opened in River North earlier this year.
- * The 311-room Conrad Chicago, which opened last November, offers 12,000 square feet of meeting space.
- * The Omni Chicago Hotel (7,000 square feet of meeting space) completed a \$9.5 million renovation of its 347 all-suite guest rooms last year.
- * The 242-room Wyndham Lisle-Chicago Hotel & Executive Meeting Center has added an 11,000-square-foot, IACC-approved executive meeting center.
- * The Millennium Knickerbocker Hotel Chicago (18,300 square feet of meeting space) will be renovating its 305 guest rooms and meeting rooms into 2008.
- * The 535-room Drake Hotel (32,000 square feet of meeting space) has opened its newly renovated \$1 million fitness facility.
- * The 520-room W Chicago Lakeshore (12,000 square feet of meeting space) debuted the Bliss Chicago Spa.
- * The Entourage, a new special event venue located in the hub of a major corporate and business center in northwest suburban Chicago offers seven meeting rooms, including a 3,800-square-foot ballroom for up to 200-person reception.

Flagship Property

Located on Michigan Avenue overlooking Grant Park, the 1,544-room Hilton Chicago is the flagship property of Hilton Hotels Corporation and offers more than 234,000 square feet of meeting space. Highlights include a 28,000-square-foot Athletic Club complete with a 20-yard indoor lap pool and indoor cushioned running track and Buckingham's, one of the city's finest steak houses. Another top-rated steak house, Stetson's Chop House, can be found at the Hyatt Regency Chicago, a 2,019-room property offering 228,000 square feet of meeting space.

Sanofi-Aventis Pharmaceuticals, based in Bridgewater, NJ, has held meetings at the Hilton Chicago, including a three-day training event for 1,000 attendees. Ligia Alas, who served as a meeting planner/analyst with the company at the time of this interview, noted that Chicago provided a central location for the participants, who flew in from all over the country. "We used all the meeting space at the Hilton and some converted sleeping rooms," Alas remarked. "We had about 30 breakouts in addition to our general session."

Although the meeting included no offsite events, for a more recent meeting at the Hilton Chicago for 450 attendees, she staged dine-arounds using 39 restaurants, and found Chicago's dining scene offered great variety and reasonable prices.

Another previous meeting in the city included an architectural tour for a smaller group that was "fantastic," said Alas. "It was a cruise and we had an architectural guide who gave us main points on each



building, including construction dates, features and who built it." More than a tour, it turned into an "urban teambuilding" exercise. Divided into teams, attendees tried to absorb all the information and answer the most questions at the end of the tour to win small prizes.

Sanofi-Aventis also held a meeting for 650 attendees at the 1,639-room Palmer House Hilton, which features more than 70 meeting rooms and 110,000 square feet of meeting space. The hotel's current restoration project includes the addition of an entire floor of deluxe-tech conference and meeting facilities, redesigning the Monroe street entrance, remodeling 1,000 guest rooms and adding 54 new suites, a new spa and upgraded fitness center.

Magnificent Mile

Among Chicago's midsize properties, a fine option is the 424-room Westin Chicago River North, located on the banks of the Chicago River in the business and theater district. The hotel offers 28,000 square feet of meeting space and the Ember Grille. Attendees can walk to Millennium Park and the Magnificent Mile. Located on the famed Mile is the 792-room InterContinental Chicago, featuring more than 40,000 square feet of meeting and function space, including six ballrooms and 30 meeting rooms. The 5,800-square-foot Grand Ballroom is accented with handpainted murals and a 12,000-pound Baccarat Crystal Chandelier. The InterContinental is also convenient to both airports: 16 miles from O'Hare and 12 miles from Midway.

At the 632-room Swissôtel Chicago, Arnold found the 27,000 square feet of meeting space, particularly the 6,016-square-foot Grand Ballroom, ideal for her group. "With 225 people I usually do a chevron setup, which a lot of rooms cannot accommodate," she noted. "The general session was a perfect fit, probably one of the best fits that I've had for this particular meeting in years." Her attendees were also quite pleased with the lodging. "From almost every guest room you literally have a wonderful view of Navy Pier or the lake, and everyone had commented when they got to their room that they had a lovely room and view," said Arnold.

The Fairmont Chicago aptly hosted the annual national sales meeting for Sunnyvale, CA-based Kyphon, Inc., a company specializing in restorative spinal therapies. The event has been regularly planned by San Francisco, CA-based Trademark Event Productions. "Chicago was a new destination for most of the 450 attendees," remarked Martin Becker, producer for Trademark.

The 692-room hotel's 14 meeting rooms totaling 62,000 square feet worked well for Kyphon's general session and breakouts. "We do a very large general session with an extensive stage presence and a double-screen rear projection," Becker related. "So we had a large-enough



Built in 1921 in French Baroque style, the elegant Chicago Theatre hosts corporate meetings in its glamorous 3,600-seat auditorium; receptions in the Grand Lobby and Mezzanine; seated dinners on the stage; and more. Complete corporate packages include themed entertainment, menus and historical tours of the theatre.

Photo courtesy of The Chicago Theatre

ballroom to take up the room with a good portion of our production and still have space for 450 people. They also had plenty of rooms for us to choose for our five breakout sessions. We felt like big fish in the hotel and received a lot of attention, which is key for this group.” And since the event was held in early February, the group benefited from off-season rates, he added.



Imagine an elegant dinner around the Caribbean Reef or among the fishes of Waters of the World. It's all possible at Shedd Aquarium, which can accommodate up to 1,800 attendees for receptions and up to 600 for dinners.

Photo courtesy of John G. Shedd Aquarium

kitchen-and-bath-industry client staging a product launch. Nearly 950 attendees were comfortably accommodated, experiencing an “artist’s eye view” of the product. “We have a vendor who recreates images on canvas to make them look like oil-based paintings, and we took a day redesigning (the venue) with artwork product shots positioned all around the room, clear glass with uplighting and flowers,” said Cross. The Chicago Illuminating Company, where Commonwealth Edison was previously based, is another picturesque space for corporate functions.

Major institutions available for group events include:

- * The Art Institute of Chicago Museum accommodates up to 300 for receptions, while the Rubloff Auditorium seats 949. The museum’s new north wing is set to open in spring 2009.
- * The Chicago History Museum offers a variety of indoor spaces and an outdoor plaza with a view of Lincoln Park.
- * Founded in 1893, The Field Museum of Natural History can host as many as 10,000 for receptions and its Stanley Field Hall and Balcony seats 1,800.
- * The International Museum of Surgical Science offers an elegant setting with views of Lake Michigan for up to 200 attendees.
- * Shedd Aquarium, home to 8,000 aquatic animals and the world’s largest indoor aquarium, can host receptions for as many as 1,800 guests or dinners for up to 600, and features a full-service events and catering department.
- * The first facility of its kind in America, Adler Planetarium opened in 1930 and can accommodate up to 375 attendees for seated dinners and up to 600 for receptions.

One quintessential Chicago experience that planners should consider is the blues. There’s no

shortage of bars to recommend, from Buddy Guy's Legends to Kingston Mines to B.L.U.E.S. Also, House of Blues is one of Chicago's premier restaurant and concert venues.

But one thing is certain — a Chicago incentive will not give anyone the blues, and planners continue to have confidence in its drawing power. Said Cross, "If I have a client who wants to do an incentive trip in the summer and they need to be in the U.S., one of the first things we say is, 'Let's go to Chicago. Let's go downtown and stay at one of the upscale hotels, treat the attendees right, let them shop on Michigan Avenue, rent a boat and take them out on Lake Michigan.'" Rest assured, attendees will find that an offer they can't refuse. **C&IT**